Another De Morganish Novel

THE WORLD'S ILLUSION. By Jacob Wassermann. Translated by Ludwig Lewisohn. Harcourt, Brace & Howe.

Reviewed by H. L. PANGBORN.

However strange and repellent such a book as this seems to us it must be admitted to be a masterly production. Wassermann is a Viennese with a score or so of novels to his credit, some of which have had a vogue in Russia, but this is the first of his work to gain worldwide attention, the first to appear in English. Its welcome here will hardly be so enthusiastic as in Europe, since so much of it is foreign to our habits of mind. But as a picture of the decadent elements in European society, both at top and bottom, as an explanation of social wrongness as it appears to a central European, it is of great value.

Moreover, Wassermann is an artist of high rank. He has dramatic sense and an extraordinary facility and power in realistic description, although as a storyteller he tends to prolixity. This story, merely as fiction, is nearly twice as long as it needed to be, despite its skilful construction. That is due, on one side, to a too definite German thoroughness, and on the other to an over-expansion of Russian idealism. For the impulse behind his thought is clearly Russian. In a way, he "derives" from Tolstoi, though his work is none the less strongly individual. It has none of the taint, the sardonic grin, that marks such Austrian work as Schnitzler's. Wassermann is profoundly sincere. It would take a column even to summarize its plot, or condense the story in outline. Its chief thread is the growth of young Christian Wahnschaffe from the idle, vicious life of a very rich, unoccupied youth (unoccupied except in multifarious erotic adventure) to complete self-abnegation, the giving up of his wealth and devoting himself to an attempt to understand human misery and to be of service. Numerous other characters follow something the same course, to varying ends, each of them realizing the wrongness of things, in some way, and either striving to remedy matters or giving it up as a tragic futility. Eva Sorel, the wonderful dancer, stands for art and intelligence, as Christian does for the wealth and culture of modern society. After their love affair ends she turns to ambition, as the mistress of a Russian Grand Duke—and is spectacularly killed.

When Christian begins to see a light he gives up his fortune, goes to live among the proletariat in Berlin, saves a prostitute from violence and takes her home with him, as a part of his service to humanity. He meets among these poor folk a simple, lovable young Jewess who becomes an inspiration to him, but she is hideously murdered. He seeks out the murderer and manages to "reclaim" him, after an extraordinary discussion, culminating in a sort of vicarious atonement. Then Christian goes his way, for further service to suffering humanity.

Jacob Wassermann.

But such a meagre outline gives little idea of the rich complexity of the story.

Its compelling power consists in the vigor and precision of its statement of human misery, both at the top and in the lowest depths. The bottom layers are unmitigatedly bestial, the middle classes stupid and hard, and the upper layers unspeakably corrupt, with a refinement of selfishness that makes them scarcely human. Yet you feel that the portraits are validly truthful.

As the suggestion of a new gospel Christian's solution seems a little tenuous, but as a presentation of certain problems his experience is significant. Wassermann is a national psychiatrist. In his own words he is exploring—

". . . great epidemics of the soul, illnesses of the sexes, deep rooted maladies of whole nations, a ghostly chase between heaven and earth, new proofs of psychical bonds that stretched from millennium to millennium as well as from man to man."

As an expositor of social morbidity he must be hailed a master. Mr. Lewisohn's translation is admirably fluent; a brilliant performance in a difficult field.

A Story of Newport

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE. By Edith Wharton. D. Appleton & Co.

Reviewed by ELEANOR HAYDEN

TO sit on a bench in Washington Square with the pale autumn sunlight filtering through the trees—to look up occasionally beyond the little Italian children romping over from Bleecker street—spilling themselves and their strident personalities across the venerable stretch of green toward the old red brick houses—some of them still preserving against encroachment the polished-brass, spotless-window-curtain atmosphere of a day that is done, others already giving up to the surge of new life pushing up, up, up—and then to turn back with a smile and sigh to the pages of the book in one's lap—this is the ideal way in which to read Mrs. Wharton's new novel.

And if, as the twilight falls, one continues to sit on the bench, the romping children will go home. As it is a bit chilly in the early evening the square is not too popular now. One can wait quietly watching the lights begin to twinkle and over the white arch see the stars prick themselves into the blue "inverted bowl we call the sky." And for a time one can linger in the world Mrs. Wharton has made to live again in the pages of her book. The place is peopled with the ghosts of those perfect products of another system.

In the day of which she writes the importunities of the incoming tide of foreigners had not yet been heard there, and the impertinences of a Greenwich Village were a thing undreamed of.

With a dash and clatter a clanging bus comes tearing through the peace of one's meditation. One rises, shivers, starts to walk back into the world of stone and steel.

The first few pages are full of a whimsical tenderness that is rare in Mrs. Wharton's art. These people of the 1870's hearing "Faust" at the sociable old Academy, coming in their private broughams or in a "brown coupe," are children—children who are playing at a fascinating game called life in a very tiny world which they think is a very large and impressive place. For a time one wonders if perhaps Mrs. Wharton is going to let them stay children playing in this pleasant yet restricted plot.

But presently one realizes that it isn't such a very different world after all. Though the days of knowing every one from the Battery to Canal street have passed, and though the guests at a fashionable ball no longer recurl their hair over the gas burner in the hostess's bedroom before going down, and though a swift kiss from one's betrothed in the conservatory later is no loger the astonishingly daring thing it may have been then—still the essentials of life remain. Love, that word that sometimes seems like an old and battered coin worn so thin by hard usage that the original inscription has become meaningless, and loyalty, that inherent tradition of breeding which a leisure class is supposed to cultivate in its finest flower, and the ancient code that prevents snatching at happiness behind the backs of those who trust—these things persist strangely in a changing world.

Archer, the "leading man," marries the wrong girl and later asks Ellen, whom he loves, to go away with him to some land "where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole life to each other, and nothing else on earth will matter." She answers him with wistful bitterness: "Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there? I knew so many who've tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations or places like Boulogne or Pisa or Monte Carlo."

Perhaps the saddest thing in this book is the picture Mrs. Wharton draws of Newland Archer, after his children have ceased needing him and after the obligations of a lifetime are terminated by death, going to Paris, where Ellen Olenska has spent the intervening years. He sends his son up to see her, and with an artistic reticence which only Mrs. Wharton is capable of he sits "for a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk, his eyes never turning from the balcony. At length a light shone through the windows, and a moment later a man servant came out on the balcony, drew up the awnings and closed the shutters. At that, as if it had been some signal he waited for, Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel." . . .

There are other perfect things in this book besides a perfect ending. Sillerton Jackson still lives. His counterpart walks in Newport every morning in the summer along Bellevue avenue to the beach for a swim, telling stories of his "old Newport," when tennis parties and luncheons following were "the thing" before the Casino and the Clam Bake Club accelerated the pace of the place. The youngsters are too intent on their own existence to listen to him with the awe of the young men in the club box who waited for his verdict in Newland Archer's day, but he is still there, and if you happen to sit beside him at tea he may even describe the old archery contests. His knowledge of social ramifications is still extensive, though the world of his forerunner has been smashed beyond repair.

To any one who loves Newport—the real Newport—Mrs. Wharton's description of turning off the Avenue, crossing Spring street and driving out toward old Catherine's place on her piece of "cheap land overlooking the bay" is thoroughly satisfying, as are her pictures of Archer's drive up the island, Paradise Rocks, the goldenrod and brambles of the Portsmouth roads and the fog lurking at Saconnet to come in after the golden haze of the sun has set over the harbor and Conanicut low in the distance. . . .

There are minor characters who are ineffacably etched on one's memory—Miss Sophy Jackson, "who was entertained by all the people who could not secure her much sought after brother and who brought home to him bits of minor gossip that usefully filled in the gaps in his picture"; the imperturbable Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, widow of The Struthers shoe polish millions, who manages to "slip into society the winter of the chickenpox when all the married women were in the nursery" and their husbands took to patronizing the amusing Struthers's Sunday evenings—one has seen them all. Mrs. Wharton knows her world down to its last detail and she permits the reader to share it with her.

Like Novel, Like Review

By DUDLEY A. SIDDALL.

WINSOME WINNIE AND OTHER NEW NONSENSE NOVELS. By Stephen Leacock. John Lane Company.

NOTE.—If Stephen Leacock can pick out eight types of novels and make the reader chuckle all the way through eight burlesques on fiction, why can't a reviewer apply the same principle?

THE ACCUSING REVIEW:

It is evident to our suspicious mind that Leacock saw in the 1920 housing situation a great opportunity. Presumably he is a poor man, for he follows not one, but two, of the world's most meagrely paid vocations. He is a college professor and a humorist. He wanted to appropriate Dr. Eliot's five-foot shelf idea. But being poor he was aware of what's befallen five-foot shelves since Dr. Eliot told publishers how to publish. They are used at night to sleep the baby on, and by day as dining tables, while between meals the precious sixty inches are utilized as ironing boards, as flower pot stands, and as storage spaces for the monthly coal ration.

So what does he do? Under the title of "Winsome Winnie" he produces eight complete novels—a regular Fiction Fiend's Friend—in the space of one inch, including cover and jacket.

NOTE.—One of the favorite devices of popular reviewers is the resort to the capital I. This makes them popular.

THE UPPER CASE REVIEW:

I and Steve Leacock entered the dining room together, through different doors. I and he both got in free. He was scheduled to speak and I got in on a Press Ticket.

I was single at the time and I was paying My own board. I ate heartily. Then I sneaked out and took My girl to a movie. I returned at 11:30. Steve was still talking and the audience was still laughing.

I appreciate My responsibility in recommending Steve's new book, "Winsome Winnie," for My wife's aunt always reads My reviews to find out what not to get at the public library. But I gladly lend My name (on request) to Steve's stuff, because anybody who can make a banquet audience laugh till midnight in prohibition times deserves all the support he can get.

NOTE.—Next we have

THE IMPRESSIVE REVIEW.

Fiction has been so standardized that the picturesque heterogeneousness of half a century ago has been sadly diminished. Against this abominable modernized standardization arises that past master of satire and wit—Prof. Stephen Leacock. His most recent work, "Winsome Winnie and Other Nonsense Novels," comes to us guised as humor, but even the undiscerning will detect that he has struck straight at the vitals of modern literature in all its horrid decadence, using as weapons his sharp sword of ridicule and the blasting power of his unmatched ability to score at the expense of his contemporaries without straining for effect.

NOTE.—It betokens vast knowledge on the part of a reviewer to prove that some one who wrote a book never wrote it at all. Recalling the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy and others we now put the Corona on the baby's lap and write

THE WISE GUY REVIEW:

While Stephen Leacock's name is attached to the new volume of satirical novelettes under the title of "Winsome Winnie," it has come to us that the real author of the work is none other than Mark Twain. This belief in literary circles has gained credence ever since it became known that Prof. Leacock was seen experimenting with a ouija board at a Toronto tea.

It has been pointed out that Leacock is not the kind of a man who would waste time reading a season's crop of love stories, civil war tales, detective yarns, political novels, narratives of the sea and other products of leading literary lights. And if he never read them it would manifestly be impossible for him to have outranked the rankest popular sellers.

On the other hand, Mark Twain has had virtually nothing to do since his death. The savants, consequently, hold the theory that Mark Twain did the work, while Prof. Leacock with the aid of a ouija board gets the credit. A very simple premise, is it not? Yes, very simple.

NOTE.—Our wife, who is serious minded, has read over our shoulder to here. Now she suggests that we try to write

A HUMOROUS REVIEW.

We can't!

John Fox Jr.'s Last Novel

ERSKINE DALE, PIONEER. John Fox, Jr. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Reviewed by E. W. POWELL.

"Erskine Dale, Pioneer," is not a problem novel. This last work of John Fox, Jr., completed just before he died, is one of his best and offers all that his readers have come to expect by way of romantic setting, love of nature, high minded sentiment, the charm of his characters and the purity of his diction.

"Erskine Dale, Pioneer," has no modern soul vivisecting. If it had it would not fit the period of the tale or America at any time till of late years—and it does fit. The psychological probing, so fashionable at present, did not belong to Revolutionary days or to the Kentucky frontier and tidewater Virginia. At that time the code of living was not questioned. It was not an age of introspective investigation and discovery. Life was predominantly social or athletic—externally active. In Virginia there was a traditional and static solution of the universe, and in the backwoods the exigencies required constant alertness, exertion and personal prowess, simplifying men's thinking. Love, hate, passion, rivalry, jealousy, honor were taken for granted and lived without the aid of test tubes.

Consequently the dramatis personæ of Erskine Dale seem like Elizabethans transplanted to a virgin country, the scenery of which could not be more vivid if staged before the eyes, for John Fox, Jr., knows and loves and lingers over his Kentucky wilderness and the Eastern plantations of the time as if they were a hallowed old homestead.

He knows intimately the birds and the beasts, big and little, of his mountains, the flowers, the trees, the streams, the trails, the colors, the odors, and the sky in sunshine or storm, at dawn or sunset.

In the first chapter he is translated to a Western stockade, which Indians soon attack, introducing the hero, a white lad brought up by the red men and having all their ways, who soon makes the journey to Virginia, where by rights of primogeniture he is heir to the magnificent Dale estate. Woodsman though he be, both blood and his early training tell. In addition to the Indians' stolidity and stoicism he displays his inherited "quality"; the sensibility, the adaptability, the finely tempered mettle and the pride of his forebears, so that no matter what his social blundering, every one accepts and likes him. But he soon slips away to the woods again, first deeding his inheritance to the heroine, his little cousin, Barbara.

Barbara is presented from the masculine point of view, illusive, imperious, impulsive, lovable and fascinating, with a full share of "woman's wit" and intuition, else why did she kiss Erskine "good-by" and make love to him the very day she had wildly betrayed her grief when she had feared that Erskine in a duel had killed a lover, one Dane Grey, and the villain of the story. Such scenes are not emphasized or again referred to. The reader is expected to realize their significance.